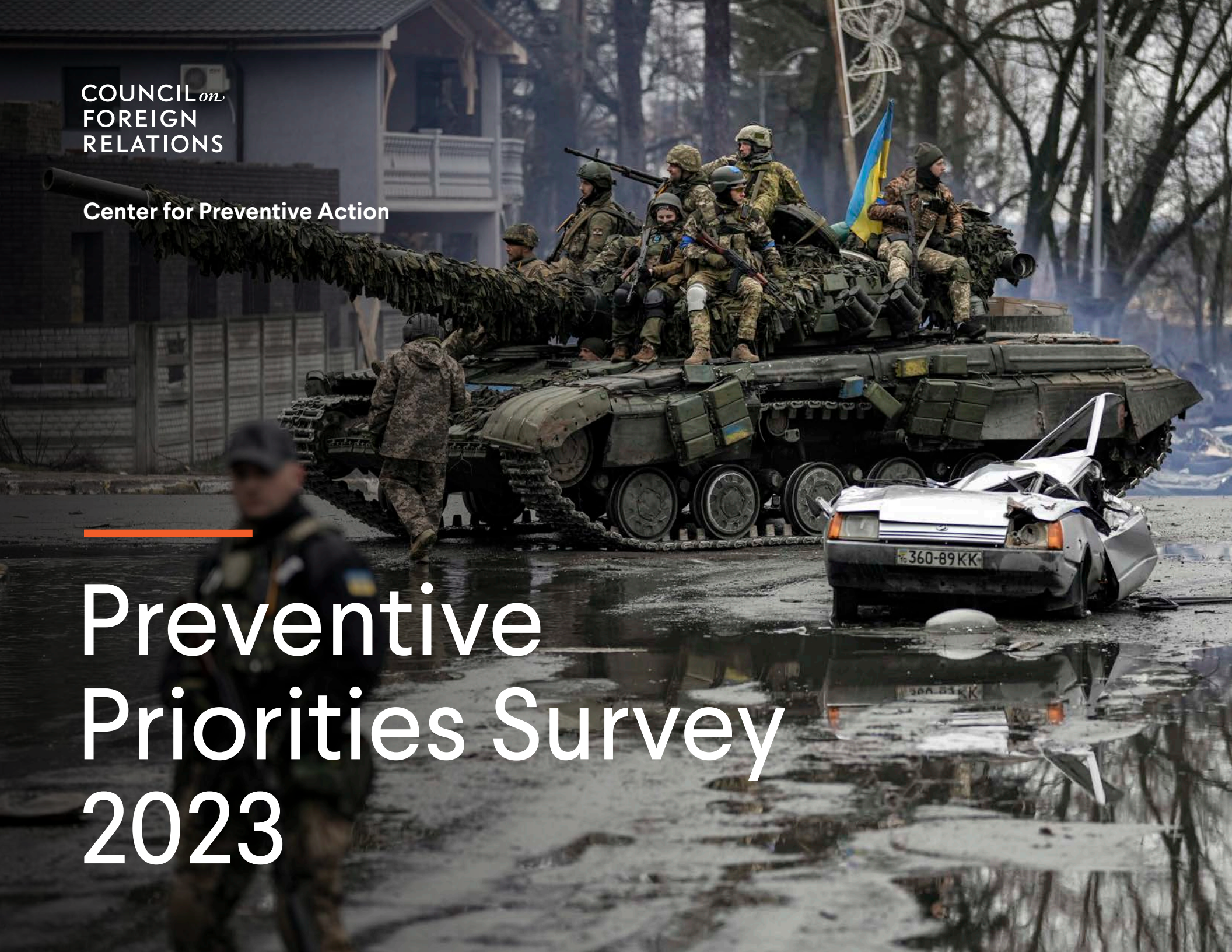


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Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2023



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Paul B. Stares

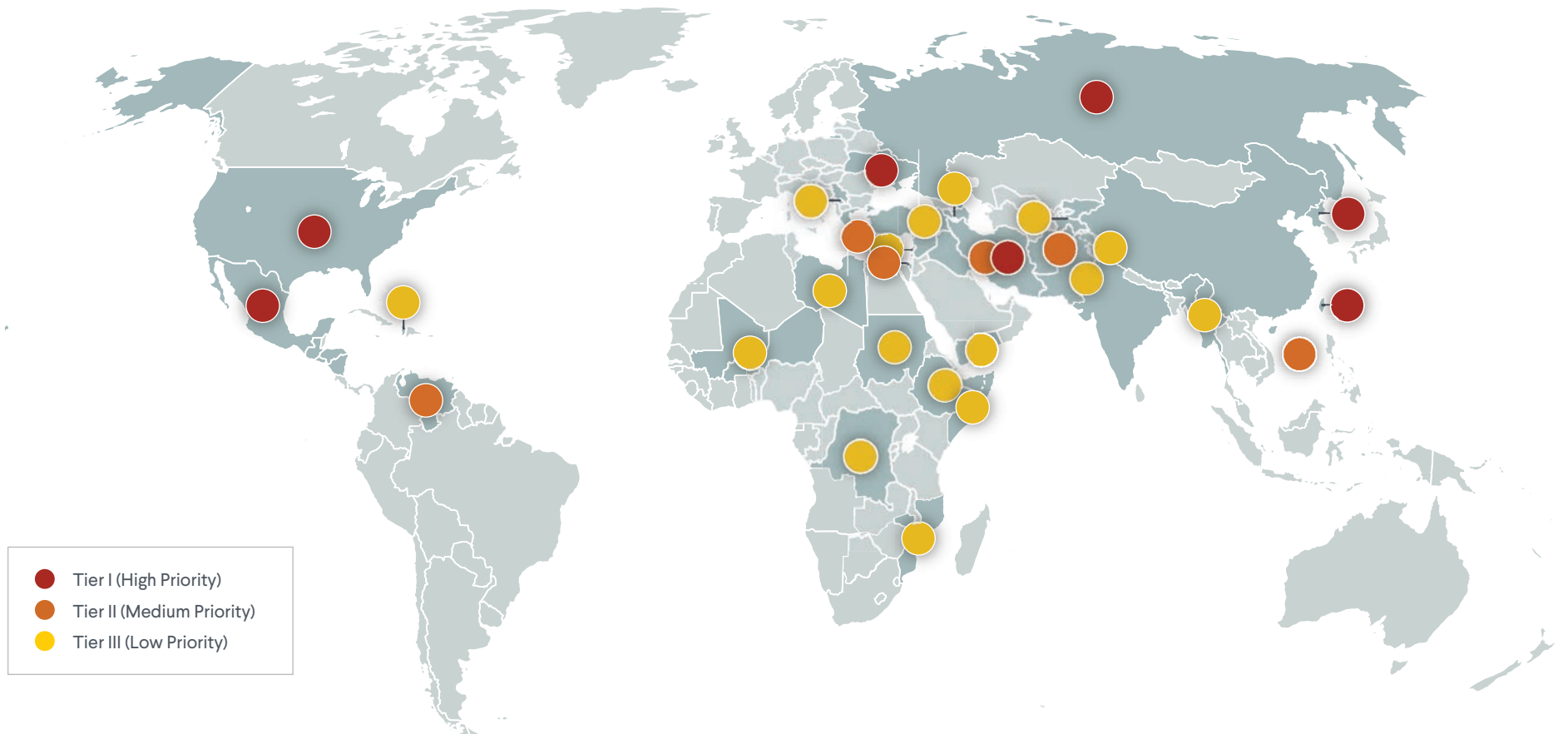
General John W. Vessey Senior Fellow for Conflict Prevention

Director, Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action's annual Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) evaluates ongoing and potential conflicts based on their likelihood of occurring in the coming year and their impact on U.S. interests. The PPS aims to help the U.S. policymaking community prioritize competing conflict prevention and mitigation demands.

To learn more about ongoing conflicts, visit the "Global Conflict Tracker" at [cfr.org/globalconflictracker](https://www.cfr.org/globalconflictracker).

The Top Conflicts to Watch in 2023



About the Preventive Priorities Survey

The world took a dangerous turn in 2022. High-intensity armed conflict broke out in Europe, something widely considered to be unimaginable just a few years ago. Although the United States has, for the time being, forsworn direct military involvement in repelling Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the course of events could easily dictate a change in policy. Conflict between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia, in other words, has become a real danger. Over the same period, U.S. relations with China have also plummeted, principally due to differences over Taiwan. Here, too, the risk of war between two nuclear-armed major powers is growing more acute.

As if Taiwan and Ukraine were not enough to worry about, several disputes in other parts of the world also became more menacing in 2022, notably those involving Iran and North Korea. Given the United States' global security interests and its unparalleled set of security commitments, the likelihood that new demands could suddenly be asked of its armed forces is now clearly growing.

The deteriorating global security environment brings new urgency to the long-standing U.S. imperative to take early preventive action to avert the most dangerous contingencies from materializing. This is easier said than done, however. The future is inherently unpredictable, and the United States has many security concerns. Policymakers, moreover, are typically consumed with managing the issues of the day and have little time left to think about what could happen tomorrow. Unsurprisingly, they are often blindsided and, thus, unprepared when dangerous crises do suddenly arise.

The United States need not be hostage to fortune as the world grows more dangerous. It can make informed judgments about the likelihood of specific threats by discerning trends and gauging the presence of risk factors associated with different kinds of conflict. Similarly, the United States can consider in advance the likely impact of plausible events on its interests. When combined, such assessments can help U.S. policymakers decide where and when it makes the most sense to focus their preventive efforts.

With these goals in mind, the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) at the Council on Foreign Relations has surveyed



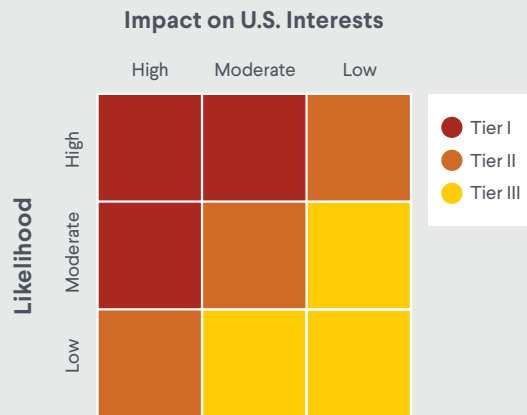
Fighter planes launch from the flight deck of the U.S. Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan, in the South China Sea, on July 28, 2022. (Mass Communication Specialist Third Class Gray Gibson|U.S. Navy)

American foreign policy experts every year since 2008 to ascertain which sources of instability and conflict warrant the most concern for the coming year. Each respondent is asked to assess the likelihood and potential impact on U.S. interests of thirty contingencies identified in a prior public solicitation (see methodology, page 4). Those events or series of events are judged to be plausible over the next twelve months—a time-frame that permits more confident forecasting and allows time for a meaningful policy response. The results are then aggregated and the contingencies are sorted into three tiers of relative priority for preventive action.

As in previous years, the results of this exercise should be interpreted with care for three reasons. First, the PPS only assesses contingencies of a certain type—essentially, *foreign* conflict-related risks to U.S. interests that could conceivably lead to the United States deploying and using military force. Thus, the survey does not include domestic sources of insta-

bility and violence *in the United States*, though many respondents suggested them in the prior solicitation of contingencies. Second, the PPS also only assesses the risk of relatively discrete *political* or *military* events. Natural or man-made environmental disasters were thus excluded. So, too, were broad concerns about the effects of global warming (though some contingencies recognize this as a factor), as well as primarily economic or public health-related concerns. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional foreign conflict-related concerns they believed warranted attention. The most common are listed as noted concerns below. Third, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in November 2022. The world is a dynamic place, and so geopolitical assessments and the resultant ordering of priorities need to be regularly updated, which CPA does with its award-winning “Global Conflict Tracker” interactive, accessible at cfr.org/globalconflictracker.

Risk Assessment Matrix



Definitions

Impact on U.S. Interests

- **High:** contingency directly threatens the U.S. homeland, a defense treaty ally, or a vital strategic interest, and thus is likely to trigger a U.S. military response
- **Moderate:** contingency indirectly threatens the U.S. homeland and/or affects a country of strategic importance to the United States that is not a defense treaty ally
- **Low:** contingency affects a country of limited strategic importance to the United States but could have severe/widespread humanitarian consequences

Likelihood

- **High:** contingency is probable to highly likely to occur in 2023
- **Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2023
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2023

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2023 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In October 2022, CPA harnessed various social media platforms to solicit suggestions about possible conflicts to include in the survey. With the help of the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house regional experts, CPA narrowed down the list of possible conflicts to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible in 2023 and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

In November 2022, the survey was sent to more than 18,900 U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom nearly 540 responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment matrix definitions).

3. Ranking the Conflicts

The survey results were then scored according to their ranking, and the contingencies were subsequently sorted into one of three preventive priority tiers (I, II, and III) according to their placement on the accompanying risk assessment matrix.



Soldiers exiting from an amphibious assault vehicle run to position during a landing drill as part of the Han Kuang military exercise in Pingtung, Taiwan, on July 28, 2022. (Ann Wang/Reuters)

2023 Findings

Notable takeaways from this year's survey include the following:

- For the first time since the PPS began fifteen years ago, the possibility of a foreign terrorist organization inflicting a mass-casualty attack on the United States or a treaty ally was not proposed as a plausible contingency for the coming year. The 9/11 era, when foreign terrorist-related threats dominated the results of the PPS, appears to be over. The possibility of a highly disruptive cyberattack targeting U.S. critical infrastructure by a state or nonstate actor remains the top homeland security concern.
- The majority of Tier I contingencies now concern either potential flashpoints involving the major powers (e.g., a cross-strait crisis around Taiwan, escalation of the war in Ukraine, and instability in Russia) or nuclear weapons development by Iran and North Korea. The risk of the United States becoming embroiled in a military confrontation with either China or Russia (and conceivably both simultaneously) has risen. Although no Tier I contingency was judged to be very likely in 2023, it is still sobering that each was given an even chance of occurring.
- PPS respondents define what matters to U.S. interests much more narrowly than in recent years. Not since 2017 have there been so few Tier I priorities—seven in total. Two contingencies that warranted this ranking last year, Afghanistan and Venezuela, are now judged to be Tier II concerns, while Haiti and Lebanon have slipped to Tier III—even though conditions in those countries have either deteriorated or not changed significantly in the interim. Furthermore, over half of all the contingencies surveyed in the 2023 PPS now qualify as Tier III priorities—an unprecedented number. Even though the majority were judged to have an even chance of occurring, the likely impact of most on U.S. interests was assessed to be low. Tier III contingencies include three involving countries selected by the Joe Biden administration to receive special attention and long-term U.S. foreign assistance under the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA)—Haiti, Libya, and Mozambique. (The other two GFA priorities—Papua New Guinea and coastal West Africa—were not even proposed for the 2023 PPS.)
- Although the PPS does not evaluate potential natural disasters or other environmental crises, an unprecedented number

of 2023 contingencies identify the consequences of climate change as a contributing factor—including those related to Central America and Mexico, the Sahel, and Somalia.

- Following a trend from previous surveys, respondents judged Africa and the Middle East to be the most crisis-prone regions in 2023. Each contingency involving African states was ranked as having a low impact on U.S. interests.

Additional observations of this year's survey are also noteworthy:

Seven new contingencies were included in the 2023 Preventive Priorities Survey. The new contingencies consist of escalating brutal repression of popular protests in Iran resulting in possible regime change; rising tensions and potential military confrontation between Greece and Turkey; mounting ethnic tensions between Kosovo and Serbia; growing violence on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border; intensifying conflict and worsening humanitarian conditions in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo; increasing popular dissatisfaction and civil unrest in Russia resulting in a power struggle in Moscow; and surging migration fueled by violence, deteriorating economic

conditions, and extreme weather in Central America, including Nicaragua, and Mexico.

Nine contingencies changed significantly from previous surveys. The 2023 Libya contingency was updated to account for the 2022 Libyan presidential election; last year's contingency discussed government failure more generally. The 2023 contingencies involving Afghanistan and Myanmar were adapted to highlight the roles of the Taliban and junta, respectively, in accelerating each country's particular crises. This year's contingency regarding Ethiopia was amended to account for the November 2022 peace agreement. The 2023 North Korea contingency expands the geographical scope of a potential crisis from the Korean Peninsula to all of Northeast Asia. The 2023 contingencies for Taiwan and China-India relations were updated to account for recent heightened military activity. This year's contingency involving Kashmir was modified to acknowledge the security concerns within the region itself, although the focus has historically been on Kashmir's role in India-Pakistan relations. Finally, the 2023 Haiti contingency was revised to address end-of-year discussions of a potential

foreign military intervention to restore public order and basic services.

Seven contingencies assessed last year were not included in the 2023 survey. Besides a mass-casualty terrorist attack on the United States or a treaty ally by a foreign terrorist organization, these include: growing ethnic tensions and political instability in Cameroon; increasing violence, political instability, and civilian displacement in Nigeria; escalating tensions between Ethiopia and South Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and disputed territory; growing political unrest in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and heightening tensions between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara. Additionally, last year's survey featured a distinct Mexico contingency whereas this year's incorporated long-standing concerns regarding drug-related violence in Mexico into one contingency that includes Central America.

Other Noted Concerns

Although the survey was limited to thirty contingencies, respondents had the opportunity to suggest additional potential foreign policy crises that they believe warrant attention. Among the most cited were the possibilities that

- increasing Russian military activities in the **Arctic** trigger an armed confrontation involving two or more Arctic powers;
- intensifying sectarian divisions and social unrest in **Iraq** ignite violent clashes between the public and security forces that could destabilize the central government;
- growing violence from self-proclaimed Islamic State operations, intensifying ethno-religious tensions, and surging election violence in **Nigeria** lead to widespread civilian casualties and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian conditions; and
- escalating sectarian violence and growing political unrest, exacerbated by the effects of climate change, precipitate an acute humanitarian crisis in the **Central African Republic**.



Top: Young demonstrators shout slogans and make the defiant three-finger salute during an anti-coup protest in Yangon, Myanmar, on May 18, 2022. (NurPhoto/AP Photo)

Bottom: A woman walks past a tent at the internally displaced persons camp of Guyah in the Afar region of Ethiopia, on May 17, 2022. (Michele Spatari/AFP/Getty Images)



Top: People run while police fire tear gas during a protest demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Ariel Henry after weeks of shortages in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on October 10, 2022. (Ralph Tedy Erol/Reuters)

Bottom: Iranians protest the death of twenty-two-year-old Mahsa Amini after she was detained by the morality police in Tehran, on October 1, 2022. (Middle East Images/AP Photo)

Tier I ■

Likelihood: Moderate

Impact: High

- A** An escalation of coercive pressure by **China** toward **Taiwan**, including heightened military activity, precipitates a severe cross-strait crisis involving the United States and other countries in the region
- B** An escalation of the armed conflict in **Ukraine** resulting from the employment of unconventional weapons, spillover into neighboring countries (including cyberattacks on critical infrastructure), and/or the direct involvement of NATO members
- C** A highly disruptive cyberattack targeting **U.S. critical infrastructure** by a state or nonstate entity
- D** Popular dissatisfaction with the war in Ukraine and worsening economic conditions lead to growing civil unrest in **Russia** and a power struggle in Moscow
- E** An acute security crisis in Northeast Asia triggered by **North Korea's** development and testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles
- F** A military confrontation between **Israel** and **Iran** over Iran's nuclear program and its continued support for militant groups in neighboring countries
- G** Increased violence, political unrest, and worsening economic conditions in **Central America** and **Mexico**, aggravated by acute weather events, fuel a surge in migration to the United States



Tier II ■

Likelihood: High
Impact: Low

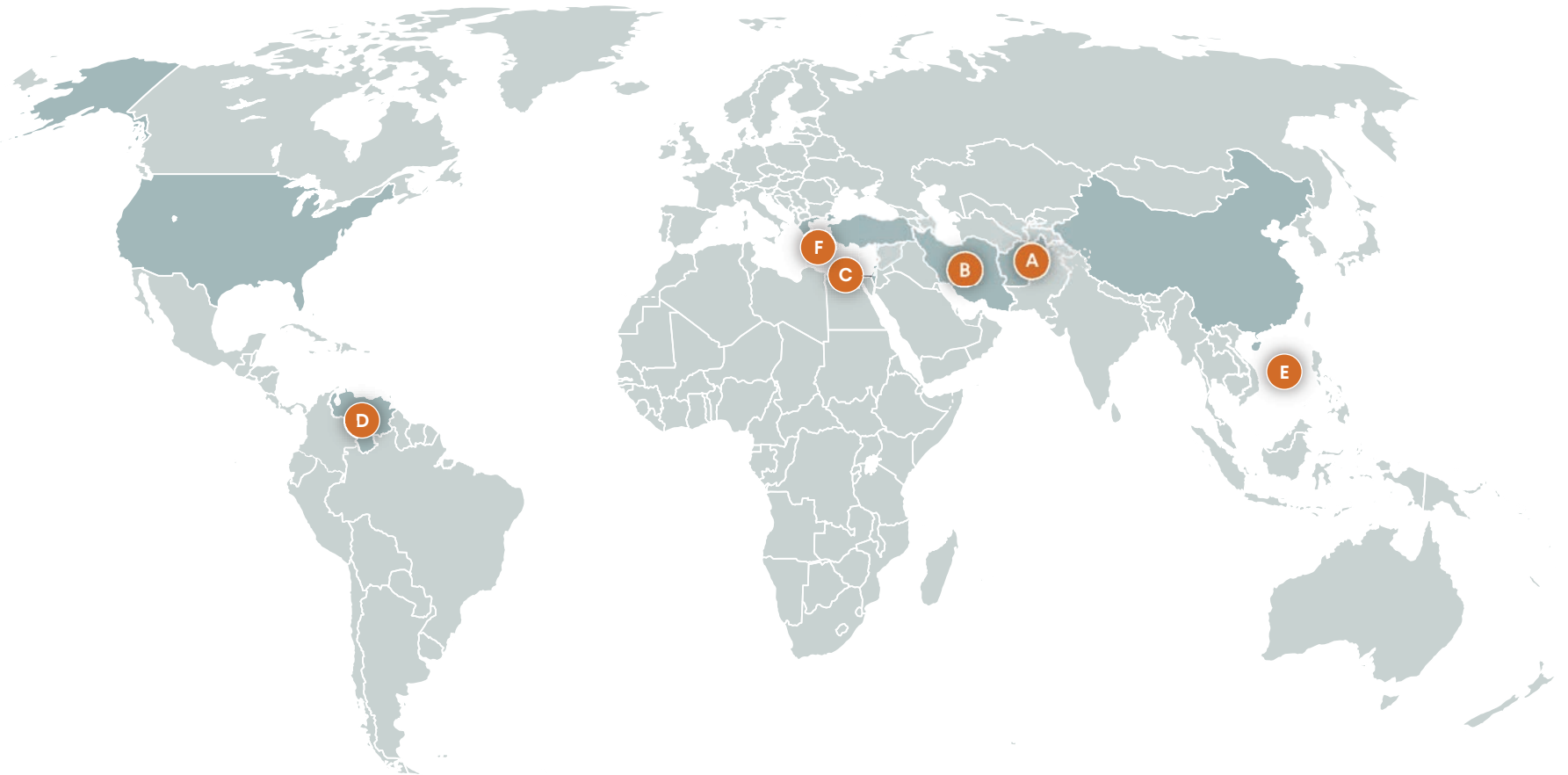
- A** Taliban efforts to consolidate nationwide control of **Afghanistan** fuel increased violence and exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian emergency

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Moderate

- B** Brutal repression of popular protests in **Iran** leads to widespread civilian casualties, growing political instability, and potential regime change
- C** Heightened antagonism between **Israelis** and **Palestinians** over settlements, access to resources, and political rights leads to violent clashes and exacerbates regional tensions
- D** A continuing deterioration of social and economic conditions in **Venezuela** leads to further political strife and increased migration outflows

Likelihood: Low
Impact: High

- E** Aggressive Chinese actions in the **South China Sea** lead to an armed confrontation involving China, the United States, and/or U.S. allies
- F** A military confrontation between **Greece** and **Turkey** in the Aegean Sea or Eastern Mediterranean, prompting a major crisis within NATO and the European Union

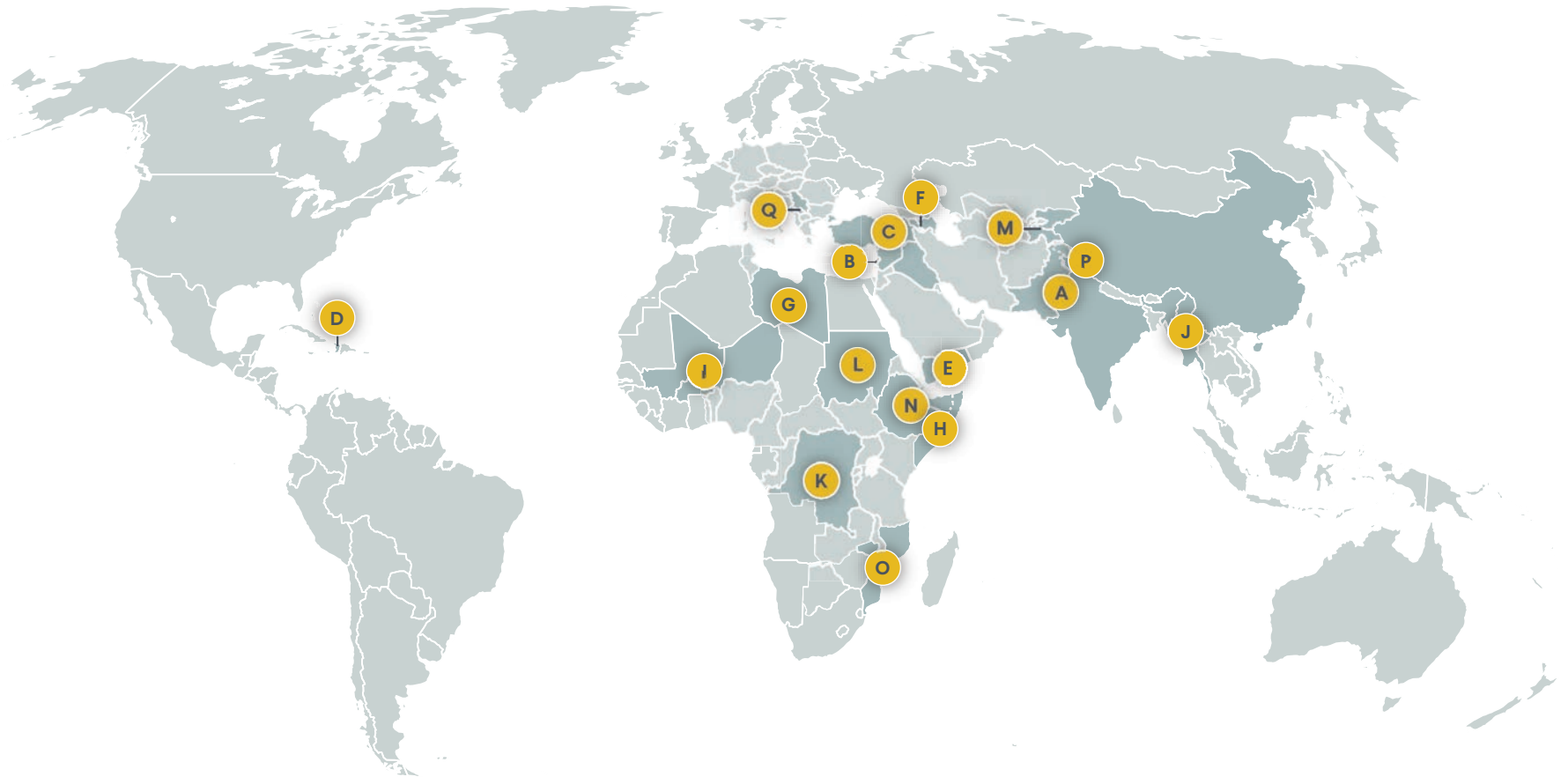


Tier III ■

Likelihood: Moderate

Impact: Low

- A** Escalating unrest, violence, and repression in Indian-administered Kashmir provoke renewed tensions between **India** and **Pakistan** and a breakdown of cease-fire commitments
- B** Worsening economic conditions and political instability escalate state collapse in **Lebanon**
- C** Escalating violence between Turkish security forces and various armed Kurdish groups within **Turkey** and/or in **Iraq** and **Syria**
- D** Compounding domestic crises accelerate state failure in **Haiti**, leading to a foreign military intervention to restore public security and basic services
- E** Renewed fighting in **Yemen** between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi rebels, leading to worsening humanitarian conditions and heightened regional tensions
- F** Escalating conflict between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** in and beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, potentially involving regional powers, including Turkey
- G** Failure to hold elections in **Libya** intensifies armed conflict between rival factions supported by foreign militaries, increasing migration into neighboring areas
- H** Growing violence and worsening drought-induced famine in **Somalia** bolster al-Shabaab's military and political power
- I** Growing political instability compounded by climate change leads to intensified violence and a worsening humanitarian crisis in the **Sahel** (particularly in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger)



- J** Increasing atrocities committed by the junta in **Myanmar** lead to growing political instability, increased migration outflows, and heightened regional tensions
- K** Escalating conflict between state and nonstate armed groups over territory and natural resources in the eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**, leading to worsening humanitarian conditions and heightened regional tensions
- L** Intensifying repression of protests, escalating communal violence, and deteriorating civil-military relations spark civil war in **Sudan**
- M** Shifting regional geopolitics and worsening resource scarcity fuel violent border skirmishes between **Kyrgyzstan** and **Tajikistan**, resulting in further military escalation
- N** A resumption of hostilities between **Ethiopia** and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, leading to renewed civil conflict and a worsening humanitarian crisis
- O** Ineffective governance and deteriorating economic conditions prompt an upsurge in militant activity in northern **Mozambique** and an increase in civilian casualties

Likelihood: Low
Impact: Moderate

- P** Increased military deployments and infrastructure development on the **China-India** border prompt armed clashes between Chinese and Indian troops

Likelihood: Low
Impact: Low

- Q** Heightened ethnic tensions between **Kosovo** and **Serbia** ignite violent border clashes, potentially necessitating foreign military intervention

About the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by:

- *Issuing regular reports* to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing sources of instability and formulate timely, concrete policy recommendations that the U.S. government, international community, and local actors can use to limit the potential for deadly violence.
- *Engaging the U.S. government and news media* in conflict prevention efforts. CPA staff members meet with administration officials and members of Congress to brief on CPA's findings and recommendations, facilitate contacts between U.S. officials and important local and external actors, and raise awareness among journalists of potential flashpoints around the globe.
- *Building networks with international organizations and institutions* to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- *Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention* to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.

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Cover: Ukrainian servicemen ride a tank next to a civilian vehicle destroyed during fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on April 2, 2022. (Vadim Ghirda/AP Photo)

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